

"Dear and Mutch Loved One"—An Iowan's Vicksburg Letters

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"'Dear and Mutch Loved One'—An Iowan's Vicksburg Letters." *The Annals of Iowa* 43 (1975), 49-61.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.11235>

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“Dear and Mutch Loved One”— An Iowan’s Vicksburg Letters

edited by Edward G. Longacre

John Myers was born in Ohio in 1838 and at an early age migrated to Toledo, Tama County, Iowa. There he married a local girl and bought a small farm. Though semi-educated, he rose to a responsible position in his community: by age twenty he was Road Supervisor of Tama County, handling all manner of highway maintenance and improvement chores.

In August 1862, heeding President Lincoln’s call for volunteers to preserve the Union, Myers, along with his younger brother Samuel, enlisted in Company F, Twenty-eighth Iowa Volunteer Infantry. Again he rose to a level of some prominence, attaining the rank of sixth corporal by the time of his muster-in on September 15. His regiment soon afterward joined the Second Brigade of the Twelfth Division, XIII Army Corps in Major General Ulysses Grant’s Army of the Tennessee. It saw its first battle action in early May 1863, during the pivotal fighting in the Vicksburg campaign.

During the campaign Corporal Myers wrote frequently to his wife, Cecelia, and young son, Edward, back in Toledo. He spelled strictly by ear—often employing unusual, archaic phrasing and substituting such letters as “t” for “d” or “s,” writing “hat” rather than “had” and “Divition” instead of “Division.” Even so, his correspondence vividly describes his experiences and those of his comrades in such significant battles as Port Gibson, on May 1, 1863, and Champion Hill, May 16, where the Twenty-eighth Iowa suffered almost thirty per cent casualties. At Champion Hill Myers was slightly wounded several times and was surrounded by Confederates, following his regiment’s retreat in the face of superior numbers—events he painstakingly records. Other letters

detail little-known facets of siege warfare, the activities of foraging parties in enemy country, and the internal bickering which resulted from conflict over how vacancies in the officer corps should be filled. In the end, as his letters also reveal, Myers had to contend with an enemy even deadlier than Rebel bullets—diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever, and "chill fever," which ran wild through Federal camps in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

These letters have been edited as subtly as possible. Myer's quaint spelling and syntax have been preserved, as has his eccentric style of punctuation. However, his prose has been grouped into paragraphs, and corrections and comments elaborating on various personalities and events have been interjected to aid the reader in understanding Myer's writing.

I wish to thank the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska for permission to publish the Myers Letters.

April the 17/63

Camp neare [New] Carthage [Louisiana]

Dear woman

it is again with the greatest of pleasure that I take this opportunity to write you a few lines to let you [k]now that I am well and hope this will find you the same to tell you where we ar will be a prety hard mater for I dont hartly now my self we are about 20 miles down the River from Vicksburgh and about 8 miles from Carthage

we left Millichans [Milliken's] Bend yesterday morning and marched to this plase we ar on the Louisiana site of the River we hav not got quite to the River yet and have got to stay long enough to fix the leavy [levee] the enemy cut it to stop us from travling they ar fortifying at Carthage and we expect to hav an ingagement with them if they dont leave before we get their they only have about 1500 men and we hav about 40,000 here and one hole Divition that will be here son [soon]

we ar trying to work our way to Jackson Missippi to cut off the retreat of the rebels of Vicksburgh and then our forses will attact [attack] Vicksburgh and we will give them thunder thair will be 90,000 men stationed around Vicksburgh and I think it will fal in a few days

well I must hury and finish my letter I received your letter

date of Apr the 2/63 and was glat to heare from you and that you was all well the boys ar all well and in good heart they think they wil have some thing to do . . . well I must stop writing the male is reaty to leave [I] remain your husband

John Myers

[P. S.] the guns ar thuntering . . . and the Camp is in consiterable exitemend we ma hav a litel fight this afternone but we ar rety for them I must stop for the exitemend is getting to great for me to write aney more.

#

Camp near Vicksburgh May the 7/63

Dear and mutch beloved one

it is with the greatest of pleasure that I take this oportunity to write a few lines to let you now that I am well and getting along well I received a letter from you on the 27th of Aprile and was glat to hear from you and that you was well I found 16 stamps inclosed in it and was very glat to receive them for I was entirely out of stamps

we have hat some hart fighting sins we crost the Mississippi River we crost the River 45 miles below Vicksburgh [and] 5 miles below Grand Gulf but only the gunboats and artilery was engaged in the Grand Gulf fight thair was 5 men killed and 21 wounded on our site I don't now how maney the enemy lost

we dit not get [to] the plase that day but ran the blockade and landed 5 miles down the River then calculated to martch to Grand Gulf by way of Port Gibson but was met by the enemy . . . [with] in 2 miles of Port Gibson wher we hat a battel with them

the enemy was in a canebrake and heavy timber ad first and we hat to drive them out with the beyonet witch we don with grate sped and success we then hat them on the open field wher we shot them down by the hundred but they stot [stood] thair ground til 11 oclock they began to retreat and we charged on them and took 2 batries and quite a number of prisoners

the fight then seased til 1 oclock when the enemy got in to another canebrake and opened thair batries on us and we again opened our batries on them and flanked them with the infantry and soon tock [took] the balens [balance] of thair batries . . . but they stot thair ground til after sunset then they retreated batly

whiped thair loss in killed and wounted was about 1400,
 prisioners 1000 our loss [was] 650 kild and wounded 2 [were]
 wounted in our Company but not disabeled . . . Captain [John
 A.] Staley was struck on the sord belt and I hat a small match cut
 in my hat rim . . . and sevrel others war hit about their garments
 in a similar maner the boys all fought with grate bravry we
 fought [by] the Zouave Drill we laid down to load and by so
 doing saved a grat many men

we left the River a week ago yesterday with 3 days Rations and
 hav not hat any thing to eat sins—only what we cold get I hav
 bean in the satel [saddle] nearly every day sins the battel running
 the hole country over after some thing to eat . . . I was out day
 before yesterday with a squat of 5 men and we wend 12 miles from
 Camp and we came to a nise plantation with a butiful grove round
 the house and a hedge fense along the road so that the inmates of
 the house dit not notice our aproch we dismounted tied our
 horses and martched up to the dore before we war notised when
 they saw us stanting at the dore they all jumped and screamed
 like if they was all agoin to be taken [prisoner] I told them they
 neat not be scart for we was only yankey soldiers and never nowen
 [known] to harm ladies but was hungry and wanted some thing to
 eat we took posesion of the tabel and eat a harty dinner and then
 helpt ourselfs to sutch other things as we wanted and left the
 ladies to reflect over the lost dinner and the aproch of the yankee
 soliders. . .

well I must stop writing and get rety to march we ar agoing to
 start ahead now goodby

John Myers

#

May the 8/63

Dear woman

I again take my pen in hand to let you know that I am well this
 morning I hav nothing new to write only we martched a few
 miles nearer Vicksburgh

We ar stationed in line of battel for sevrel mile up and down a
 creek we hav got 60,000 men here and expect to be reanforced
 to the amount of 120,000 tomorrow we hav got the word heare
 that the rebels war agoing to meet us on Black River with 70,000

men but that is the plase we want to meat them rather then in
thair fortfyacions

well I must stop the male is rety to leave goodby dear
woman

John Myers

#

Camp near Clinton Mississippi
May the 17th 63

Dear woman

I again take up my pen to finish my letter I was calt on duty
the other day just as I got it begun and hav not hat time to write
sins til today

we hat one of the blatyest [bloodiest] fights yesterday that has
been fought for some time we was martching from Jackson to
Vicksburgh we was about thirty fife miles south of Vicksburgh
at Bolton station and was met with a heavy forse of rebels [We]
hat our forses scattered over consiterable spase of country and our
Division was attacted for the first one and we fought them ten to
one for about 2 hours when they began to drive us back

we hat just crossed a field when the Rebels mate a charge one
[on] us and just naturaly cut us all to peases and scated our
Regiment so that I dit not find the Regiment til 9 oclock at night
. . . I hat my bick [big] toe shot off and was struck with a spand
[spent] grape shot on the rite nea [right knee] and the left elbow
and a ball on the left ancle [ankle] witch was a glansing shot [It]
cut my pants and left quite a weld [welt] on my angel the other 2
shots did not penetrate the flesh but lamed me
consiterable Captain Staley [was] taken prisoner. . .

I dit not notice the retreat when our men started and when I
started I saw that our men was falling thick and fast before I
cold get to the lines they all jumped into a ditch and layed down
and fired a few rounds i jumped in the ditch and fired a few
times and looked round to see what the rest of the boys was doing
being they hat stoped shooting and hear [here] they was running
as fast as they cold go but [for] a few that was huncking [hugging]
the ground as clost as posable to avoid beaing hit and the Rebels
was coming on the run about 100 yarts off

I again took to heels and run and the balls whisteled round me

like hale and just as I got to our regiment again Samuel Hamitt [Hammitt] was wounded he was hit in 2 places once thro the right breast and once thro the right thi[gh] and he begged for me to cary him off from the field I picked him up and ran for the nearest plase of shelder and laid him in the shade of a large tree where he was out of danger [I] took my canteen and gave him drink and wet his fase and by that time the rebels hat got between me and our Regmend and I took my old gun and let them hav the contants of it a few times and then ran again not nowing wher I was going to

I felt my way as carefall as posabel thro the thick brush and treas [trees] I at length heard some one halting me and I stoped and to my surprise I saw General [John A.] Logan and I hureyed up to him he hat a forse of 8 thousand and I told him the condition our Devition was in and he threw his lines in. . .

I went with them and got them compleatly confused and then we mate a bayonet charge on them and took 2000 prisnors without loosing more than 15 or 20 men I helped to take them to a convenient plase for safe keaping and then went in a hunt of my own Regmend but did not secceet in finting it and so I went back one [on] the Batel field and sutch a site that I witnestt their I hope I may never hav to witnes again the deat men and wounded layed as thick on the field as sheap in a paster the Iowa troops sufered sevearly our Company lost nearly half. . .

I think I will be a[ble] to [come] home by the first of August if we succeed in geting Vicksburgh we have taken 10,000 rebel prisnors and 36 peases of artillery we hav hat thre[e] battels and sevel scermishes [skirmishes]. . .

John Myers

#

May the 27/63
at Vicksburgh

Dear wife

. . . well I hav not got mutch to write for it has been nothing but a continuel rore of muskets canons mortars and the bursting of shels sins the begining of the battel [on] the 16 and no telling when it will end or how

we hav got them surroundet so that they cant get away we

hav a line of battel from the River at Hanes [Haines's] Bluff to the river below the fortifications 10 miles in length and the gunboats ar guarting the River we hav a trench all the way roun their fortifications and so close their that they cant get to thair canons at all whenever a man shows himself he gets the balls sent after him like hale

we laid in the line for two days an [did] not lose a man we was releaved this morning we hav got men enough to hav 3 releafs and so we hav only to be in the trenches 1/3 of the time the canons keep pouring shot and shel in to their forts all the time thair was a shel bursted in a small fort yesterday within a hundred and fity yart of wher we laid and it cleart the fort of its contants in a grate hurry we colt hav taken the fort handy but dit not want it . . . we could not hold it with safety and bombard the other forts

we lost quite a number of men the first 5 days fighting we tried to take the plase by storm but the forts was so high that it was an udder imposability to scale the walls and repuls the enemy we lost nearly one third of the men in the charg that came in front of the best forts some Regiments lost 1/2 our Regt was not in the charge on the account of our loss May the 16. . .

I have no more roome to write perhaps I will write another sheat full before I get to send this I have got to keep letters retty on hant for I dont know 5 minuts beforehand when the male leaves

My love to you
J. Myers

#

May the 30/63
Camp near Vicksburgh

Dear and mutch loved one

. . . well dear wife I have just come out of the trenches wher I hav been in the last 2 days and dont feal mutch like writing letters on the account of not sleeping mutch but I guess I will hav to giv you some explanation before you will now what I mean by beaing in the trenches

we hav got a trench or a ditch dug clear round the Rebels

fortifications and [with] in a hundred yards of them and hav got our batries planted in back of the trench throwing shells in their forts all the time we hav men liing [lying] in the trenches watching the Rebels and when the shels hits in thair forts they will run upon the banks [parapets] and then we can shoot them from our trenches

I hav not heart but 2 or 3 rebel batries fired sinse I am heare I dont now why they [do not] youse [use] thair artilery more unless it is because they ar getting scars [scarce] of amunition when we took Jackson Grant telegrafted to [Confederate General John C.] Pemberton at Vicksburgh and told him to send him amunition as quick as posable for the Damd yankeys were coming and signed it [with] Rebl General [Joseph E.] Johnston['s] name when the cars got to Edwards [Edwards's] station we captured the train with 2 cars loaded with shells and canon balls we hav also taken one hundred and eleven canons from them sins the first of this month so I think thair artilery is about played out I may be mistaken and it ma[y] not be the case but I hope it is so

we have don som hard fighting sins the first of May I [thought] . . . I hat seen hart sits [sights] and hart times before I ever saw a battel field but I fount out better at the battel at Edwards station I went in the hospitel rite after the battel and [was] also on the battel field and of all the hard sits I ever saw—I saw thair [the worst] I could find men wounted in every shape that you could imagin some with one leg shot off others[s] with both some with one leg and one arm off and one man with his tong[ue] shot off the ball past thro his teath and cut off half his tong

we hav not go[t] mutch hart fighting to do heare we hav only hat 3 or 4 men kild in our brickate [brigade] sins we ar[rived] at this plase and 2 of them was kild by bad shels from [our] Canons the greatest share of our fighting is don by artilery

we hav some grate times here with the secesh [Confederates] we don't shoot at them after dark and the moon shines so that we can see one another . . . we have a right to go half ways acrost to their lines and they can come half ways acrost to our lines as long as neather site [side] dont cary aney arms with them and lots of the secesh that ar getting sick of fighting come cleare acrost and giv themselves up . . .

I sent my love and best respects to you and all the rest of your folks

Goodby
John Myers

#

Camp south east [of] Vicksburgh
June the 6 1863

Dear wife and bosom friend

. . . things are going about the same we are stil sheling the plase but hav no more prospects of a surrender then we hat 5 days ago we hav got to do all the shooting ourselves

thair is still deserters coming from thair army every night and they all tell us that they ar getting very short of rations and amunition the scarsety of amunition was the reason whi they dit not return the fire any more than they do they still hav some hopes of General Jo Johnston coming in our rear and help[ing] them out . . . but I think thair case is rather billious for aney hopes of recovery we can stand to stay heare as long as they can stay in thair forts

we have plenty to live on and they hav nothing but [a] litel corn bread they ar on quarter rations at that and we hav a chance to cleane up round the camps and they dont they have horses and mules and dogs and cows runing round thair forts and we shoot them when they get neare thair forts and pits and if they go to bury them we shoot them

the town stinks so bat that when the wind blows from that way we cant hartly stay in our pits last Wendsday eavening [June 3] we gave them a heavy seage of about 2 hours and they wanted capel [capable] men from our Company to get as neare as they posably could to a Rebel fort that they was throwing shells into and find out what the Rebs was doing we got so close [to] the fort that we could heare them spit and talk but it stunk so that we could not stay aney time we had to retreat and give the field to Mr Canon

we get from 20 to 30 deserters come to us evry night in our Divition and they say thair is thousands of them that wants to get

away but ar afraid of trying it for feare of getting shot by thair own men

we hav not hat a man hurt in our Company heare and only 2 sick ones our 2nd Lieut and the 4th Sargent ar very sick the 2nd Lutenant [Joseph] Myers has got the billious diarah [diarrhea] Sargent James Casey has got the Consumption and flux I dont think that evry one of them will get well [note: Myers died from the disease two days later, but Casey recovered] the rest of the boys ar all well and in good spirits and I am very glad to see it for I hat[e] to heare the boys complain

well I would like to know whi you dont write oftendor I hav to write and do write evry chance I get but sins we hav come heare I hav not hat but few letters I dont now wether you dont write or wether I dont get them . . . my love to you

John Myers

#

June the 12/63

Camp [in] rear of Vicksburgh Mss.

Dear Cecelia

. . . we hav hat some warm times in our Company sins I wrote you the last letter Our 2nd Lutenant died last Monday . . . and John Hiatt our first Corporel died leaving a vakancy of 3 officers to be replased our orderly sargent the 4th sargent and 3rd and forth Corporal ar sick and our Captain is given his paroll leaving a vakency of 5 more leaving 8 vakaded plases and 2 more mite as well be . . . so the necesety of officers and the way of having them filled has rased consiterable exitement

the way we hav been electing by the vote of the Company and the question of [w]ho should be elected second Lutenant laid between Henry H. Weaver and myself and the Colonel [John Connell] hat promised Weaver the first chance of promoting him and he fount out that if he left it to a vote that I would get three forth of the votes of the Company and so he would not leave it to a vote but sent rite strate for a Comition [commission] for Weaver for second Lutenant

It mate consiterable hartness in the Comp[any] it mate our first Lut [Theodore Schaeffer] very mat at the Colonel and after the Colonel fount that it got nearly all the Company mat at him

he swore that he hat the power to appoint the officers and he wold do as he pleased . . . after he appointed Weaver he wanted to appoint me as sargent and I told him that he might appoint [w]ho [m] he pleased but he cold never promote me one bit unless he left it to a vote of the Company and if I was elected by the majority I would accept aney position the Company was amind to give me [but] if the Company cold not have the privlege to elect their own officers I wold stay wher I am so long as I stayed in Co F he left and I hav not heart a word said about it sins and I dont now [w]ho will get it nor dont care

I dont want you to say aney thing about this to aney of the neighbors so that it will get back to the Company by my writing it for it is a hart blow and our Colonel and the hole affair will be nowen [known] round Toledo and a gread deal more in a short time if things go as I think they will . . .

#

July the 24 1863

Millikens Bend La

dear and most Loved wife

wit pleasure I take the presend opertunity to write you a few lines but I cant tell you that I am well this time for I hav hat the Chill feaver ever sins I wrote you the last letter . . . I did not have it yesterday or to day yet and I am in hopes I hav got it broke I was compeled to stop recruiting [on detached duty] and go to the Regt I got here yesterday

wel I hope this will find you and Eddie boath well o you dont know how anctious I feel about you I hav not hat a singel letter from you for just one month thair was one com to the 28[th] and Sam [Myer's brother] sent it . . . to Vicksburgh to me and the fellow he send it by never gave it to me so it was lost for I never expect to see him

I was out at Jackson last weak and saw the 28th Sam and all the rest of the boys ar well they ar all coming back to Vicksburgh Johnston has vackated Jackson and goen [gone] to Georgy [Georgia] Grant wants [s] [to] folow him

while it is so hot I dont feal able to write aney more this time my sincere love and best respects to you and Eddie my best Respects to all the rest

John Myers, Orderly Sargent

July the — 1863
Millinkens Bend La.

Dear and Mutchted Loved one

with pleasure I take the present oportunity to address you again by way of a letter to let you now that I am still among the living but not well and far from it but I hope this will find you well

I hav hat the Chill feaver as I hav written you before but got that broke about 10 days ago and then took a severe Diareah witch I cant get red of all the metacen [medicine] I can get dont seem to do me aney good only help[s] to weaken me my legs ar getting so weak that I can scarsly walk more then a quater of a mile to a time and find that hart work I assur you

well I hav still not got aney letter from you to answer and thairfore haint got mutch to write and wotend [wouldn't] feel able to if I hat but I would like very mutch to now whi I dont get aney letters from you aney more if you ar agoing to quit writing to me just let me now if not I should like very mutch to hav you write a litel oftener

well I must bring my letter to a close for I feal to week to write aney more at presend be shore and answer this as sone [soon] as you get this if I dont get better in a short time I shall try to get a furlow and com home awhile

[I] remane yours truly my love and Best Respects to you

John Myers

#

Berwick La
Oct 2nd 1863

Mrs Myers

Dear Madam

Yours of Sept 13th came to hand last night & it is with a heavy heart that I sit down to answer the same When I returned to my company—we had [had] no word from your husband for some time previous—the word came that he was coming back to the Regt, but he did not come As time went on no further word [came] from John until a few days ago I received notice from the Surgeon in Charge that he died on Steamer Hospital of Typhoid fever Aug 14/63 The name of the Gen. Hospital Steamer is

"R. C. Wood." I sent his final statements & military history to the Adjt Gen at Washington D.C. Sept 23—

It is with feelings of sorrow that I look around me to see so many of Iowa's noble sons fall by the hand of disease, and in battle I assure you I was shocked when the painful intelligence reached me for I knew him to be generally hardy & in good health but alas! in the midst of life we are in death The Company & officers feel deeply his loss for he has ever reflected credit upon himself & the service by his moral conduct, loyalty, & bravery in action

I am very Resptly your Obt Servant

[First Lieutenant] Theo. Schaeffer

[P. S.] Any further information you may wish will be cheerfully given if I have it in my power to give it

Arbor Day, April 25, 1975

The Iowa State Horticulture Society observed Arbor Day this year by planting a Ginkgo tree on the south lawn in front of the Historical Building (East Twelfth and Grand, Des Moines). Jack Musgrove, Director of the Division of Historical Museum and Archives, Iowa State Historical Department, accepted the tree in the name of the children of Iowa from Corwyn Hicks, Secretary-Treasurer of the Horticulture Society.

The Ginkgo is a species of tree that connects the age of dinosaurs with our time—it is related to the tree ferns that formed our coal deposits millions of years ago. The botanical structure of the Ginkgo relates to the conifers on one side and the ferns on the other. It owes its modern existence to the Chinese, who cultivated it on their temple grounds. The Ginkgo's bright green leaves become brilliant yellow in fall, and usually drop to the ground within one day's time.

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